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# Constraints on cosmic strings using data from the third Advanced LIGO–Virgo observing run

The LIGO Scientific Collaboration, the Virgo Collaboration and the KAGRA Collaboration  
(compiled May 18, 2021)

We search for gravitational-wave signals produced by cosmic strings in the Advanced LIGO and Virgo full O3 data set. Search results are presented for gravitational waves produced by cosmic string loop features such as cusps, kinks and, for the first time, kink-kink collisions. A template-based search for short-duration transient signals does not yield a detection. We also use the stochastic gravitational-wave background energy density upper limits derived from the O3 data to constrain the cosmic string tension,  $G\mu$ , as a function of the number of kinks, or the number of cusps, for two cosmic string loop distribution models. Additionally, we develop and test a third model which interpolates between these two models. Our results improve upon the previous LIGO–Virgo constraints on  $G\mu$  by one to two orders of magnitude depending on the model which is tested. In particular, for the one-loop distribution model, we set the most competitive constraints to date,  $G\mu \lesssim 4 \times 10^{-15}$ . In the case of cosmic strings formed at the end of inflation in the context of Grand Unified Theories, these results challenge simple inflationary models.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The Advanced LIGO [1] and Advanced Virgo [2] detectors have opened a new channel to observe the Universe through the detection of gravitational waves. In their first three observing runs (O1, O2, and the first half of O3) the LIGO Scientific Collaboration and the Virgo Collaboration have reported the detection of 50 candidate gravitational-wave events from compact binary coalescences [3]. These detections have yielded important information on the population properties of these compact binary sources [4]. In the future, ground-based detectors may discover new sources of gravitational waves [5], some of which could probe the physics of the early Universe. Cosmic strings [6] belong to this category of sources. The third observing run (O3) started on April 1, 2019, and ended on March 27, 2020, and we use the data from the LIGO-Hanford (H1), LIGO-Livingston (L1) and Virgo (V1) interferometers to place constraints on cosmic strings. These constraints are reported in this letter.

Cosmic strings are line-like topological defects — analogues of vortices in different condensed matter systems — which are formed from spontaneous symmetry breaking phase transitions (with the additional condition that the vacuum manifold has non-contractible closed curves [6–9]). In cosmology, such phase transitions may have occurred at grand unification [10], corresponding to an energy scale of about  $10^{16}$  GeV, and more generally at lower energy scales. Thus cosmic strings, through their different observational predictions, offer a tool to probe particle physics beyond the Standard Model at energy scales much above the ones reached by accelerators. In particular, the production of gravitational waves by cosmic strings [11, 12] is one of the most promising observational signatures accessible by ground-based detectors.

The width of the string, of the order of the energy scale of the transition, is generally negligible compared to the

cosmological scales over which it extends. This limit is well described by the Nambu-Goto action. Nambu-Goto strings [7] are parameterized by a dimensionless quantity: the string tension  $G\mu$  related to the string formation energy scale  $\eta$ ,  $G\mu \sim (\eta/M_{\text{Pl}})^2$ , where  $G$  is Newton’s constant,  $M_{\text{Pl}}$  is the Planck mass,  $\mu$  denotes the string linear mass density [13]; we set the speed of light  $c = 1$ . In an expanding background, such as a radiation or dominated era, a cosmic string network relaxes towards a scaling solution — a self-similar, attractor solution in which all typical loop lengths are proportional to cosmic time, or equivalently they scale with the Hubble radius. Super-horizon (also called infinite) strings reach this scaling solution [14–16] being stretched by the expansion of the Universe and by losing energy through the formation of sub-horizon (loop) strings, which consequently lead to a cascade of smaller loops eventually decaying through emission of gravitational waves [12, 17, 18]. In this paper we focus on the gravitational waves emitted by the network of loops. The length distribution of loops will therefore be crucial in determining the gravitational-wave signatures. We consider different loop distribution models which have been studied in the literature; they differ in the way they model the production and cascade of loops from the infinite string network.

Cosmic string loops oscillate periodically in time, emitting gravitational waves with power [11]  $P_{\text{gw}} = \Gamma_d G\mu^2$  and decay in a lifetime  $\ell/\gamma_d$ , where  $\Gamma_d$  is a numerical factor ( $\Gamma_d \sim 50$  [19]),  $\ell$  is the invariant loop length and  $\gamma_d = \Gamma_d G\mu$  is the gravitational-wave length scale measured in units of time [20]. The high-frequency ( $f\ell \gg 1$ , where  $f$  denotes frequency) gravitational-wave spectrum of an oscillating loop is dominated by bursts emitted by string features called cusps and kinks [21–23]. Cusps [24] are points on the string that briefly travel at the speed of light; they are generic features for smooth loops. Kinks are discontinuities in the tangent vector of the string that propagate at the speed of light. They appear in pairs as

the result of collisions between two cosmic strings and are chopped off when a loop forms, hence a loop can contain any integer number of kinks. Numerical simulations of Nambu-Goto strings have shown that kinks accumulate over the cosmological evolution [14–16], while the number of cusps per loop is yet undetermined.

Cusps are short-lived and produce beamed gravitational waves in the forward direction of the cusp, while left-moving (right-moving) kinks propagate around the string, creating gravitational waves with a fan-like emission (like a lighthouse) in the directions generated by right-moving (left-moving) waves. Additionally, the collision of two kinks is expected to radiate gravitational waves isotropically. We report here searches for gravitational waves produced by cusps, kinks and kink-kink collisions, using O3 LIGO–Virgo data. In addition to distinct individual bursts, the incoherent superposition of weaker gravitational-wave bursts from cosmic strings produced over the history of the Universe would create a stochastic gravitational-wave background [23, 25].

Cosmic strings emit gravitational waves with a wide range of frequencies that can be searched by other means, including the cosmic microwave background [26], Big Bang nucleosynthesis [27] and pulsar timing arrays [28–30], see also e.g., [31–33].

The gravitational-wave emission from cosmic string loops is introduced in Sec. II. We consider two simulation-based models [34, 35] (labeled **A** and **B**) for the loop distribution. We further develop a third model (labeled **C**) which interpolates between the other two models. We derive the burst rates and the dimensionless energy density in Sec. II. Individual gravitational-wave bursts are searched in O3 data with a dedicated analysis presented in Sec. III. The incoherent superposition of bursts from cusps, kinks and kink-kink collisions, produces a stationary and nearly Gaussian stochastic background of gravitational waves. We search O3 data for this background and the results, detailed in [36], are summarized in Sec. IV. Both the burst and stochastic background searches yield no detections. Combining their sensitivities, we constrain two cosmic string parameters in Sec. V: the string tension  $G\mu$  and the number of kinks per loop. We provide a table listing the meanings of symbols used in this study in Supplemental Material.

## II. GRAVITATIONAL WAVES FROM COSMIC STRING LOOPS

Gravitational waves are produced by cusps, kinks and kink-kink collisions on cosmic string loops. The strain waveforms are linearly polarized and have been calculated in [21–23]. For a loop of length  $\ell$  at redshift  $z$ , they are power-law functions in the frequency domain for the starin [37]:

$$h_i(\ell, z, f) = A_i(\ell, z) f^{-q_i}, \quad (1)$$

where  $i = \{c, k, kk\}$  identifies the cusp, kink, and kink-kink collision cases. The power-law indices are  $q_c = 4/3$ ,  $q_k = 5/3$ ,  $q_{kk} = 2$  and the amplitude  $A_i$  is [22]

$$A_i(\ell, z) = g_{1,i} \frac{G\mu \ell^{2-q_i}}{(1+z)^{q_i-1} r(z)}, \quad (2)$$

where  $r(z)$  is the comoving distance to the loop. We adopt the cosmological model used in [37]; it is encoded in three functions  $\varphi_r(z)$ ,  $\varphi_V(z)$ , and  $\varphi_t(z)$  (see Appendix A of [37]). The proper distance, the proper volume element and the proper time are  $r(z) = \varphi_r(z)/H_0$ ,  $dV(z) = \varphi_V(z)/H_0^3 dz$ , and  $t(z) = \varphi_t(z)/H_0$  respectively, where  $H_0 = 67.9 \text{ km s}^{-1} \text{ Mpc}^{-1}$  [38]. The prefactor  $g_{1,i}$  is [39]:  $g_{1,c} = 8/\Gamma^2(1/3) \times (2/3)^{2/3} \approx 0.85$ ,  $g_{1,k} = 2\sqrt{2}/\pi/\Gamma(1/3) \times (2/3)^{2/3} \approx 0.29$ , and  $g_{1,kk} = 1/\pi^2 \approx 0.10$ , where  $\Gamma$  is the Gamma function [40].

Cusps and kinks emit gravitational waves in highly concentrated beams. Cusps are transient and produce a beam along a single direction, while kinks propagate around the loop, beaming over a fan-like range of directions. The beam opening angle is

$$\theta_m = (g_2 f(1+z)\ell)^{-1/3}, \quad (3)$$

where  $g_2 = \sqrt{3}/4$  [39]. To guarantee self-consistency (validity of the waveform), we require that  $\theta_m < 1\text{rad}$ , which is equivalent to setting a lower limit on the frequency for a fixed loop length. For kink-kink collisions the gravitational-wave emission is isotropic [41].

The burst rate of type  $i$ , per unit loop size and per unit volume, can be decomposed into four factors:

$$\frac{dR_i}{d\ell dV} = \frac{2}{\ell} N_i \times n(\ell, t) \times \Delta_i \times (1+z)^{-1}. \quad (4)$$

The first factor accounts for an average of  $N_i$  gravitational-wave burst events of type  $i$  produced per loop oscillation time periodicity  $\ell/2$ . The second factor stands for the number of loops per unit loop size and per unit volume at cosmic time  $t$

$$n(\ell, t) = \frac{d^2 \mathcal{N}}{d\ell dV}(\ell, t). \quad (5)$$

The third factor,  $\Delta_i$ , reflects that only a fraction of burst events can be effectively detected due to the beamed emission of gravitational waves with respect to the  $4\pi$  solid angle. The gravitational-wave emission within a cone for cusps, a fan-like range of directions for kinks and all directions for kink-kink collisions can be conveniently absorbed into a single beaming fraction expression:  $\Delta_i = (\theta_m/2)^{3(2-q_i)}$ . Finally the last factor shows that the burst emission rate is red-shifted by  $(1+z)^{-1}$ .

The burst rate at redshift  $z$  is then obtained by integrating over all loop sizes,

$$\frac{dR_i}{dz} = \frac{\varphi_V(z)}{H_0^3(1+z)} \int_{\ell_{\min}}^{\ell_{\max}} d\ell \frac{2N_i}{\ell} n(\ell, t) \Delta_i. \quad (6)$$

Introducing the dimensionless loop size parameter  $\gamma \equiv \ell/t$ , Eq. 6 reads:

$$\frac{dR_i}{dz}(z, f) = \frac{\phi_V(z)}{H_0^3(1+z)} \times \int_{\gamma_{\min}(z, f)}^{\gamma_{\max}(z)} d\gamma \frac{2N_i}{\gamma} n(\gamma, z) \Delta_i(\gamma, z, f). \quad (7)$$

The upper bound of the integral,  $\gamma_{\max}(z)$ , is derived by requiring the loop size to be smaller than the horizon size, i.e.,  $\gamma_{\max} = 2$  and  $3$  for radiation and matter dominated universes, respectively [37]. The lower bound,  $\gamma_{\min}$ , corresponds to the fundamental frequency of a loop, i.e.,  $2/\ell$ , leading to  $\gamma_{\min}(z, f) = 2/[f(1+z)\varphi_t(z)/H_0]$ .

We consider two analytical models, labeled **A** [34] and **B** [35], to describe the distribution of cosmic string loops,  $n(\gamma, z)$ , in a scaling regime, within a Friedmann-Lemaître-Robertson-Walker metric. These models were respectively dubbed M=2 and M=3 in [37]. In model **A** the number of long-lived non-self-intersecting loops of invariant length  $\ell$  per unit volume per unit time formed at cosmic time  $t$ , is directly inferred from Nambu-Goto simulations of cosmic string networks in the radiation and matter eras. Model **B** is based on a different Nambu-Goto string simulation [42]. In this model the distribution of non-self-intersecting scaling loops is the extracted quantity. Within model **B**, loops are formed at all sizes following a power-law specified by a parameter taking different values in the radiation and matter eras, while the scaling loop distribution is cut-off on small scales by the gravitational back-reaction scale. There is a qualitative difference between these two models, since in the latter, tiny loops are produced in a much larger amount than in the former. In addition, we will use a new model, based on [43] and labeled **C**, which extends and encompasses both models **A** and **B**. Similarly to model **B**, model **C** assumes that the scaling loop distribution is a power-law, but leaves its slope unspecified. Given the wide parameter space opened by model **C**, we will select two samples: models **C-1** and **C-2**. Model **C-1** (respectively **C-2**) reproduces qualitatively the loop production function of model **A** (resp. **B**) in the radiation era and the loop production of model **B** (resp. **A**) in the matter era. We expect the addition of these two models to showcase intermediate situations in between the two simulation-inferred models **A** and **B**. The loop distribution functions  $n(\gamma, z)$  for the three models are given in the Supplemental Material [44].

For models **A**, **B** and **C**, the contributions from cusps, kinks and kink-kink collisions to the gravitational-wave emission must be considered altogether. Indeed, the dimensionless decay constant  $\Gamma_d$  of a cosmic string, driving the loop size evolution, can be decomposed into three

contributions:

$$\Gamma_d \equiv \frac{P_{\text{gw}}}{G\mu^2} = \sum_i \frac{P_{\text{gw},i}}{G\mu^2} = N_c \frac{3\pi^2 g_{1,c}^2}{(2\delta)^{1/3} g_2^{2/3}} + N_k \frac{3\pi^2 g_{1,k}^2}{(2\delta)^{2/3} g_2^{1/3}} + N_{\text{kk}} 2\pi^2 g_{1,\text{kk}}^2, \quad (8)$$

where  $\delta = \max(1, 1/(2g_2))$ , since the gravitational-wave frequency cannot be smaller than the fundamental frequency of the loop,  $2/\ell$ , while the condition  $\theta_m < 1$  for cusps and kinks imposes  $f > 1/(\ell g_2)$ . Parameters  $N_c, N_k$  are respectively the average number of cusps and kinks per oscillation. The number of kink-kink collisions per oscillation  $N_{\text{kk}}$  is  $N_{\text{kk}} \approx N_k^2/4$  for large  $N_k$ . While this equation is only an approximation when  $N_k$  is order unity, the kink-kink contribution is very small in this case and the error would hardly affect our results. On the other hand, it is clear that the kink-kink collision quickly dominates the gravitational-wave production when the number of kinks increases, as was also shown in [45]. Here we fix  $N_c$  to be 1 and comment later on the effects of increasing  $N_c$ . The only free parameter is  $N_k$ ; we consider  $N_k = 1, \dots, 200$ , with the upper limit motivated by numerical simulations of string loops that favor  $\Gamma_d \sim 50$  [19].

The incoherent superposition of bursts from loops with all possible sizes through the history of the Universe produces a stochastic gravitational wave background (SGWB) [46]; its normalized energy density is defined as

$$\Omega_{\text{GW}}(f) = \frac{f}{\rho_c} \frac{d\rho_{\text{GW}}}{df}, \quad (9)$$

where  $\rho_c = 3H_0^2 c^2/(8\pi G)$ . The spectrum of the SGWB is [47]

$$\Omega_{\text{GW}}(f) = \frac{4\pi^2}{3H_0^2} f^3 \sum_i \int dz \int d\ell h_i^2 \times \frac{d^2 R_i}{dz d\ell}. \quad (10)$$

The integration range is restricted by two requirements. First, the size of a loop is limited to a fraction of the Hubble radius, or equivalently of the cosmic time  $\ell < \alpha t(z)$ . Second, the frequency has to be larger than the low-frequency cutoff  $f\ell(1+z) > \delta$ . In Fig. 1 we show examples of gravitational-wave spectra calculated with Eq. 10. The two plots at the top are derived from model **A** and **B** with  $N_k \gg 1$ . The dominant contribution comes from kink-kink collisions. The lower plots show gravitational-wave spectra taking  $N_k = 1$  (left) and  $N_k = 100$  (right) and are derived from model **C** with a given set of parameters (see Supplemental Material), i.e.,  $\chi_{\text{rad}} = 0.45$ ,  $\chi_{\text{mat}} = 0.295$ ,  $c_{\text{rad}} = 0.15$ , and  $c_{\text{mat}} = 0.019$ ; the subscripts refer to matter and radiation eras, respectively. When  $N_k$  is large, the dominant contribution depends on the frequency band, which is a unique feature in this model. In this study, we ignore the suppression of the gravitational waves from cusps due to the primordial

black hole production as pointed out in [48]. Including such an effect leads to lower spectrum amplitudes for small  $N_k$ , thus reducing the sensitivity to cosmic string signals. In Fig. 1 we also show the  $2\sigma$  power-law integrated (PI) curves [49] indicating the integrated sensitivity of the O3 search [36], along with projections for 2 years of the Advanced LIGO–Virgo network at design sensitivity, and the envisioned upgrade of Advanced LIGO, A+ [50], sensitivity after 2 years, assuming a 50% duty cycle.

### III. BURST SEARCH

The O3 data set is analyzed with a dedicated burst search algorithm previously used to produce LIGO–Virgo results [37, 51, 52]. The burst analysis pipeline, as well as its O3 configuration, is described in the Supplemental Material. The search can be summarized into three analysis steps. First, we carry out a matched-filter search using the cosmic string waveform in Eq. 1. Then, resulting candidates are filtered to retain only those detected in more than one detector within a time window accounting for the difference in the gravitational-wave arrival time between detectors. Finally, double- and triple-coincident events are ranked using an approximated likelihood ratio  $\Lambda(x)$ , where  $x$  is a set of parameters used to discriminate true cosmic string signals from noise [53]. The burst search is performed separately for cusps, kinks and kink-kink collision waveforms, integrating  $T_{\text{obs}} = 273.5$  days of data when at least two detectors are operating simultaneously.

The left panel of Fig. 2 presents the cumulative distribution of coincident O3 burst events as a function of the likelihood ratio  $\Lambda$  for the cusp, kink and kink-kink collision searches. To estimate the background noise associated with each search, time shifts are applied to each detector strain data such that no real gravitational-wave event can be found in coincidence. For this study, we use 300 time-shifts, totaling  $T_{\text{bkg}} = 225$  years of data containing only noise coincident events, the distribution of which is represented in the left panel of Fig. 2 with a  $\pm 1\sigma$  shaded band. The candidate events, obtained with no time shift, are all compatible with the noise distribution within  $\pm 2\sigma$ . The cusp, kink and kink-kink collision waveforms are very similar, resulting in the loudest events being the same for the three searches. The ten loudest events were carefully scrutinized. They all originate from a well-known category of transient noise affecting all detectors, that are broadband and very short-duration noise events of unknown instrumental origin [54, 55].

From the non-detection result, we measure our search sensitivity to cosmic string signals by performing the burst search analysis over O3 data with injections of simulated cusp, kink and kink-collision waveforms. The amplitudes of injected signals comfortably cover the range where none to almost all the signals are detected. Other parameters (sky location, polarization angle, high-

frequency cutoff) are randomly distributed. To recover injected signals, we use the loudest-event method described in [56], where the detection threshold is set to the level of the highest-ranked event found in the search:  $\log_{10}(\Lambda) \simeq 15.0, 15.1$ , and  $15.1$  for cusps, kinks, and kink-kink collisions, respectively. The resulting efficiencies  $\varepsilon_i(A_i)$  as a function of the signal amplitude are presented in the right panel of Fig. 2. Cusp events directed at Earth with  $A_c > 2 \times 10^{-20} \text{s}^{-1/3}$  would have produced a result more significant than any of the ones obtained by our search, with  $\sim 90\%$  confidence. In terms of loop proper lengths, this corresponds, for example, to loops larger than  $1.7 \times 10^6 (G\mu/10^{-10})^{-3/2}$  light years at redshift 100. The expected detection burst rate is calculated from the detection efficiency:

$$R_i = \int \frac{dR_i}{dA_i}(A_i, f_*, G\mu, N_k) \varepsilon_i(A_i) dA_i. \quad (11)$$

The detectable burst rate  $dR_i/dA_i$  is obtained from Eq. 7, which can be expressed in terms of amplitude using Eq. 2 and calculated for the lowest value of the high-frequency cutoff  $f_*$  which can be most abundantly observed (see Supplemental Material for details).

We assume that the occurrence of a detectable burst of gravitational waves follows a Poisson distribution with mean given by the estimated detection rate. For a set of parameters  $(G\mu, N_k)$ , models which predict a detection rate larger than  $2.996/T_{\text{obs}}$  are excluded at 95%, i.e., we exclude models that predict a  $> 95\%$  confidence level detection.

### IV. STOCHASTIC SEARCH

A search for a stochastic gravitational wave background [46] is carried out using the LIGO and Virgo O3 data [36] where a correlated background in different interferometer pairs is sought. These results are combined with those from the previous two observing runs, O1 and O2 [37, 57, 58]. The results reported in [36] assume the normalized energy density of the stochastic background, Eq. (9) is a power-law  $\alpha$  of the frequency:

$$\Omega_{\text{GW}}(f) = \Omega_{\text{ref}} \left( \frac{f}{f_{\text{ref}}} \right)^\alpha, \quad (12)$$

where  $f_{\text{ref}}$  denotes a reference frequency, fixed to 25 Hz, a convenient choice in the sensitive part of the frequency band. The search reported in [36] does not detect a stochastic background, and so sets upper limits depending on the value of  $\alpha$ . The stochastic background from cosmic strings in the LIGO–Virgo frequency band is predicted to be approximately flat, setting the upper bound  $\Omega_{\text{GW}} \leq 5.8 \times 10^{-9}$  at the 95% credible level for a flat  $\alpha = 0$  background and using a log-uniform prior in  $\Omega_{\text{GW}}$ ; the 20–76.6 Hz band is responsible for 99% of this sensitivity.

Here we perform a Bayesian analysis taking into account the precise shape of the background (see Fig. 1)



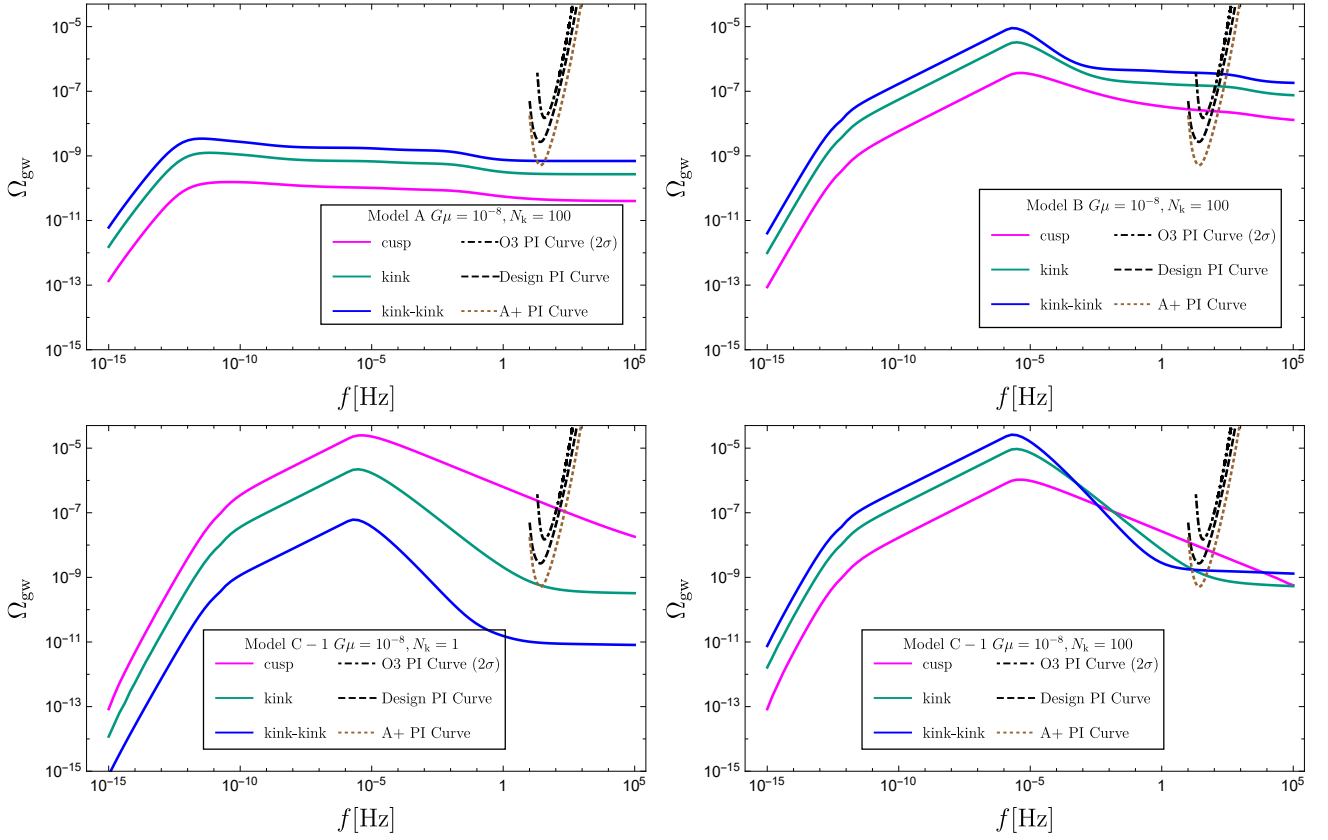


FIG. 1. Predictions of the gravitational-wave energy density spectra using different models for the loop distribution function  $n(\gamma, z)$  and for two values of the number of kinks per loop oscillation  $N_k$ , 1 and 100. The string tension  $G\mu$  is fixed to  $10^{-8}$ . Top-left: model **A**,  $N_k = 100$ . Top-right: model **B**,  $N_k = 100$ . Bottom-left: model **C-1**,  $N_k = 1$ . Bottom-right: model **C-1**,  $N_k = 100$ . For model **C-1**, we use the following model parameters (see Supplemental Material):  $\chi_{\text{rad}} = 0.45$ ,  $\chi_{\text{mat}} = 0.295$ ,  $c_{\text{rad}} = 0.15$ ,  $c_{\text{mat}} = 0.019$ ; the subscripts refer to the radiation and matter eras, respectively. We also show the energy density spectra of the three different components and 2- $\sigma$  power-law integrated (PI) curves [49] for the O3 isotropic stochastic search [36], and projections for the HLV network at design sensitivity, and the A+ detectors [50].

instead of a power-law and use it to derive upper limits on the cosmic string parameters. We first calculate the log-likelihood function assuming a Gaussian distributed noise, which up to a constant is

$$\ln \mathcal{L}(\hat{C}_a^{IJ} | G\mu, N_k) = -\frac{1}{2} \sum_{IJ,a} \frac{(\hat{C}_a^{IJ} - \Omega_{\text{GW}}^{(M)}(f_a; G\mu, N_k))^2}{\sigma_{IJ}^2(f_a)}. \quad (13)$$

Here  $\hat{C}_a^{IJ} \equiv \hat{C}^{IJ}(f_a)$ , with  $IJ$  as the detector pairs L1-H1, L1-V1, and H1-V1.  $\hat{C}^{IJ}(f_a)$  and  $\sigma^2(f_a)$  are, respectively, a cross-correlation estimator for the pair  $IJ$  and its variance at  $f_a$  [59]. Following the same approach as in the O1 stochastic analysis we use the frequency bins from 20 to 86 Hz [37] while higher frequencies do not contribute to the sensitivity. The spectrum,  $\Omega_{\text{GW}}^{(M)}(f_a; G\mu, N_k)$  at  $f_a$ , is predicted by the model  $M = \{\mathbf{A}, \mathbf{B}, \mathbf{C}\}$  through Eq. 10.

We specify priors for the parameters in the cosmic string model, i.e.,  $p(G\mu | I_{G\mu})$  and  $p(N_k | I_{N_k})$ . The variables  $I_{G\mu}$  and  $I_{N_k}$  denote the information on the distributions of  $G\mu$  and  $N_k$ , which are determined by the-

ory predictions. For  $p(G\mu | I_{G\mu})$ , we choose a log-uniform prior for  $10^{-18} \leq G\mu \leq 10^{-6}$ . The upper bound is set by the cosmic microwave background measurements [60–63]. The lower bound is arbitrary, chosen for consistency with the study in [64]; we note that our results remain almost unchanged if we choose a smaller value for the lower bound on  $G\mu$ . For  $p(N_k | I_{N_k})$ , we constrain  $G\mu$  for each choice of  $N_k$ . Therefore the prior  $p(N_k | I_{N_k})$  is taken to be a  $\delta$ -function for each value of  $N_k$ . The number of kinks per loop oscillation  $N_k$  being fixed, the posterior for  $G\mu$  is calculated from Bayes' theorem:

$$p(G\mu | N_k) \propto \mathcal{L}(\hat{C}_a^{IJ} | G\mu, N_k) p(G\mu | I_{G\mu}) p(N_k | I_{N_k}). \quad (14)$$

We calculate 95% credible intervals for  $G\mu$ .

## V. CONSTRAINTS

We show in Fig. 3 the region of the  $G\mu$  and  $N_k$  parameter space excluded at the 95% confidence level by the burst and stochastic searches where  $N_c = 1$ . For

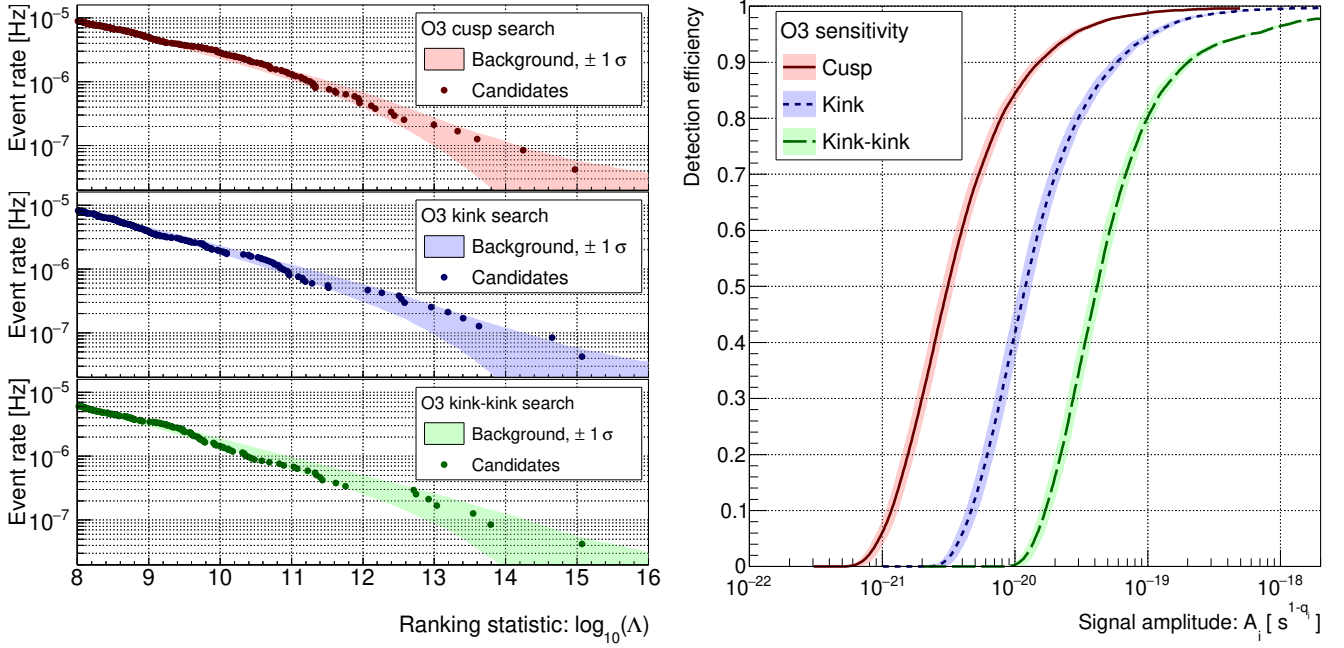


FIG. 2. Left panel: cumulative distribution of cosmic string burst candidate events produced by cusps (top), kinks (middle) and kink-kink collisions (bottom). The expected distributions from background noise are represented by  $\pm 1\sigma$  shaded areas. Right panel: the detection efficiency is measured using simulated signals, as a function of the signal amplitude for cusps, kinks and kink-kink collisions. Note that the horizontal axis measures different amplitude quantities,  $A_i$ , for the three types of signals, parameterized by the waveform frequency power law  $q_i$ .

the stochastic search (Sec. IV) we present constraints from the combined O1+O2+O3 data; for the burst search (Sec. III) we derive constraints from the non-detection result using O3 data, for models **A**, **B** and **C**. For model **C** we choose two sets of benchmark numbers: **C-1** where  $(\chi_{\text{rad}}, \chi_{\text{mat}}) = (0.45, 0.295)$  and **C-2** where  $(\chi_{\text{rad}}, \chi_{\text{mat}}) = (0.2, 0.45)$  (see the Supplemental Material).

For model **A**, the gravitational-wave signal is much weaker than the other models, leading to weaker constraints. Model **C-2** mimics the loop production function of model **A** in the matter era and of model **B** in the radiation era. In the frequency band of LIGO–Virgo, the stochastic background is dominated by the contribution from loops in the radiation era, hence models **B** and **C-2** give similar results. Conversely, the spectrum from model **C-1**, which mimics the loop production function of model **A** in the radiation era and of model **B** in the matter era, presents more subtle features. Larger values of  $G\mu$  do not necessarily produce larger signals, creating structures in this figure. For an analytical understanding of these findings, see [65]. For a better understanding of the loop visibility domain in terms of redshift, see Fig. 2 of [45].

From the stochastic analysis, the following regions, depending on  $N_k$ , are excluded:  $G\mu \gtrsim (9.6 \times 10^{-9} - 10^{-6})$  for model **A**;  $G\mu \gtrsim (4.0 - 6.3) \times 10^{-15}$  for model **B**;  $G\mu \gtrsim (2.1 - 4.5) \times 10^{-15}$  aside from a small region where  $N_k \gtrsim 180$  for model **C-1**;  $G\mu \gtrsim (4.2 - 7.0) \times 10^{-15}$  for

model **C-2**.

The burst search upper limits are not as stringent as those from the stochastic search. The constraints on  $G\mu$  for model **A** are too weak to be represented in the figure. The only case where the burst analysis leads to tighter constraints, is for model **C-1** and for  $N_k > 70$ .

Here  $N_c$  has been set to 1. It was shown that  $N_c$  scales with the number of harmonics on the loop [66]. For large  $N_c$ , the decay constant  $\Gamma_d$  is enhanced, leading to a reduced lifetime of the loop. Consequently, a large  $N_c$  gives qualitatively the same result as increasing  $N_k$ : for model **A**, the constraints are weakened, whereas for models **B** and **C** the bounds are insensitive to  $N_c$ ; this has been confirmed by our numerical study.

One can also compare these results with limits obtained from pulsar timing array measurements, indirect limits from Big Bang nucleosynthesis and cosmic microwave background data [28]. Note here we do not investigate non-standard thermal history; see however, e.g. [67, 68]. Repeating the analysis done in [37] with  $N_k$  up to 200, we find that for model **A**, the strongest limit comes from pulsar timing measurements, with  $G\mu \gtrsim 10^{-10}$  excluded. For model **B**, **C-1** and **C-2** the strongest upper limits are derived from this search.

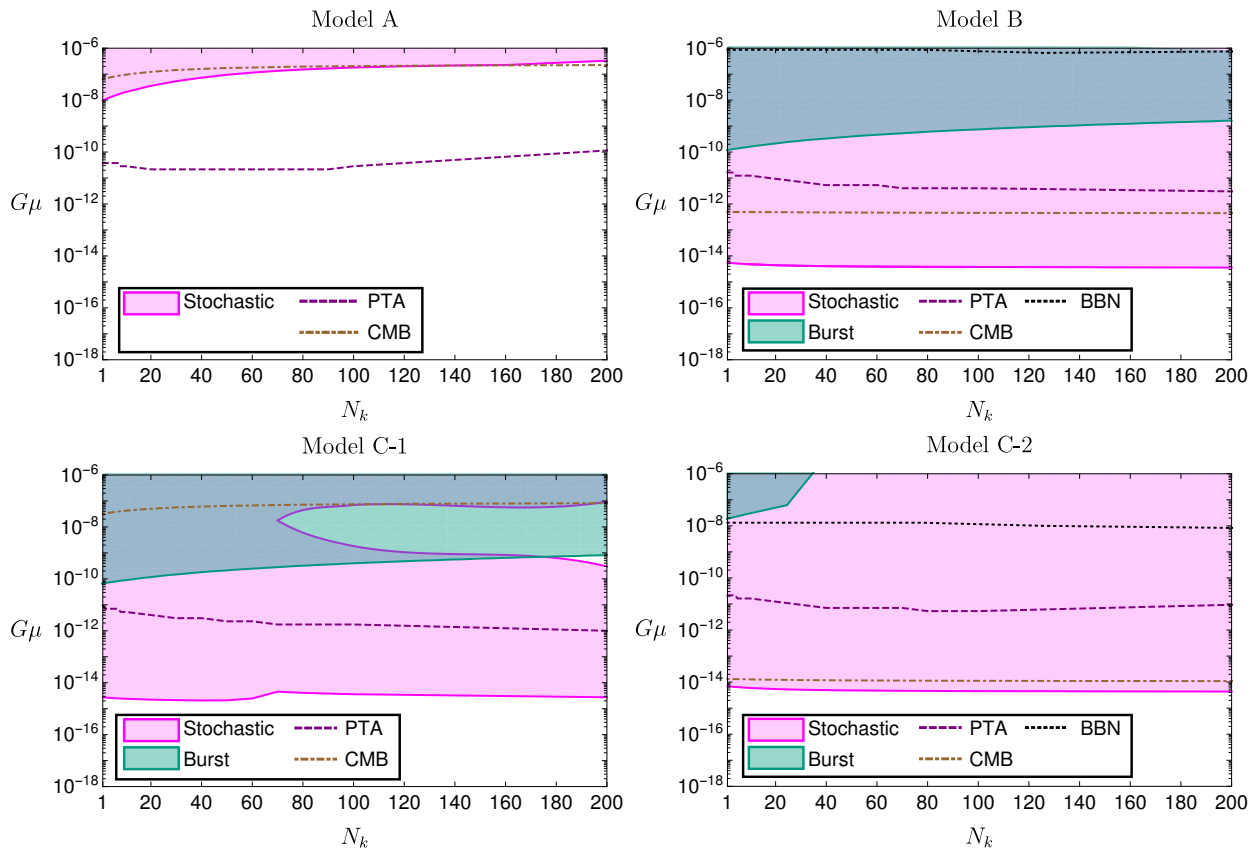


FIG. 3. Exclusion regions at 95% C.L. on the cosmic string parameter space,  $(N_k, G\mu)$ , derived from the stochastic search (pink) and the burst search (turquoise). Four models are considered to describe the distribution of cosmic string loops: model **A** (top-left), model **B** (top-right), model **C-1** (bottom-left) and model **C-2** (bottom-right). Note that the stochastic result combines the data of O1, O2 and O3 while the burst search only includes O3 data. We also report limits from other experiments: pulsar timing arrays (PTA) [28, 29], cosmic microwave background (CMB) [26] and Big Bang nucleosynthesis [27]. The notch in the SWGB constraint for Model **C-1** is explained in Supplemental Material.

## VI. CONCLUSIONS

Using data from the third observing run of Advanced LIGO and Virgo, we have performed a burst and a stochastic gravitational wave background search to constrain the tension of Nambu-Goto strings, as a function of the number of kinks per oscillation, for four loop distributions. We have tested models **A** and **B** already considered in the O1 and O2 analyses [58]. The current constraints on  $G\mu$  are stronger by two and one orders of magnitude for models **A** and **B**, respectively, when fixing  $N_k = 1$ . In addition, we have used two variants of a new model, dubbed model **C**, that interpolates between models **A** and **B**. For the first time, we have studied the effect of kink-kink interactions, which is relevant for large numbers of kinks, and investigated the effect of a large number of cusps, as both effects are favored by cosmic string simulations. In the context of cosmic strings formed at the end of an inflationary era, these results raise questions about the validity of simple inflationary models (occured between  $10^{16} - 10^{11}$  GeV) in the context of Grand Unified Theories [10], unless one invokes extra

fields in order to avoid cosmic string formation [69].

Given the current experimental results, it would seem important to intensify numerical and theoretical studies on cosmic strings. From a numerical point of view, the number of kinks and cusps should be determined. Concerning phenomenological aspects, new models, like model **C** that interpolates between model **A** and **B**, should be further explored as well as models including particle physics leading to cosmic string formation in the early Universe. On the experimental side, the sensitivity of Advanced LIGO and Virgo detectors will continue to improve [50] and a fourth interferometer, KAGRA [70], will join the network.

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### Appendix A: Table of quantities appearing in the paper

The main quantities used in this analysis and their meaning are listed in Table A.

### Appendix B: Loop distributions

For model **A**, the loop distribution is given by the sum of

$$t^4 \frac{d^2 \mathcal{N}}{d\ell dV_{\text{rad}}} = \frac{0.18 \times 2\sqrt{H_0} \Omega_{\text{rad}}^{3/4}}{(\gamma + \gamma_d)^{5/2}} t^{3/2} (1+z)^3 \times \begin{cases} \Theta(0.18t - \ell) & t < t_{\text{eq}} \\ \Theta[0.18t_{\text{eq}} - \ell + \gamma_d(t - t_{\text{eq}})] & t > t_{\text{eq}} \end{cases} \quad (\text{B1})$$

for loops produced during the radiation era, and

$$t^4 \frac{d^2 \mathcal{N}}{d\ell dV_{\text{mat}}} = \frac{0.27 - 0.45\gamma^{0.31}}{(\gamma + \gamma_d)^2} \Theta(0.18 - \gamma) \times \Theta[\ell + \gamma_d(t - t_{\text{eq}}) - 0.18t_{\text{eq}}] \quad (\text{B2})$$

for loops produced during the matter era. Note that  $t_{\text{eq}}$  is the time of the radiation to matter transition and that  $\gamma_d = \Gamma_d G\mu$ .

Models **B** and **C** rely on the assumption that loops are produced at all sizes with a given power-law. The loop production  $\mathcal{P}$  is parametrized by two additional parameters ( $c, \chi$ )

$$t^5 \mathcal{P} = c \left( \frac{\ell}{t} \right)^{2\chi-3}, \quad (\text{B3})$$

and is cutoff on scales smaller than the gravitational backreaction scale  $\gamma_c \approx 20(G\mu)^{1+2\chi}$ . The parameter  $\chi$  controls the *tilt* of the loop production function, low values of  $\chi$  favor the production of very small loops whereas high values of  $\chi$  can be approximated by a Dirac delta loop production function on the large scales, i.e., to the one-scale model. For model **B**, the loop distribution is the sum of

$$t^4 \frac{d^2 \mathcal{N}}{d\ell dV_{\text{rad}}} = \begin{cases} \frac{0.08}{(\gamma + \gamma_d)^{3-2\chi_{\text{rad}}}} & \gamma_d < \gamma \\ \frac{0.08(1/2 - 2\chi_{\text{rad}})}{(2 - 2\chi_{\text{rad}})\gamma_d \gamma^{2-2\chi_{\text{rad}}}} & \gamma_c < \gamma < \gamma_d \\ \frac{0.08(1/2 - 2\chi_{\text{rad}})}{(2 - 2\chi_{\text{rad}})\gamma_d \gamma_c^{2-2\chi_{\text{rad}}}} & \gamma < \gamma_c \end{cases} \quad (\text{B4})$$

$G$	Gravitational constant
$z$	redshift
$\mu$	string tension
$N_c$	average number of cusps per loop oscillation
$N_k$	number of kinks
$\Gamma_d$	dimensionless decay constant of cosmic strings
$g_1, g_2$	dimensionless prefactors for the GW amplitude and beaming angle
$\ell$	cosmic string loop length
$\gamma \equiv \ell/t$	loop size parameter
$\theta_m$	beaming angle for GW emission
$P_{\text{gw}}$	power of GW emission of cosmic strings
$R_i$	GW burst rate
$n(\ell, t)$	number density of cosmic string loops with length $\ell$ at $t$
$\Omega_{\text{GW}}(f)$	present fractional GW energy density spectrum
$\mathcal{L}$	likelihood used in the Bayesian analysis
$p(\text{parameters} I)$	probability density distribution of “parameters” given prior information “I”

TABLE I. Table of quantities appearing in the paper.

for loops produced during the radiation era,

$$t^4 \frac{d^2 \mathcal{N}}{d\ell dV_{\text{mat}}} = \begin{cases} \frac{0.015}{(\gamma + \gamma_d)^{3-2\chi_{\text{mat}}}} & \gamma_d < \gamma \\ \frac{0.015(1-2\chi_{\text{mat}})}{(2-2\chi_{\text{mat}})\gamma_d \gamma^{2-2\chi_{\text{mat}}}} & \gamma_c < \gamma < \gamma_d \\ \frac{0.015(1-2\chi_{\text{mat}})}{(2-2\chi_{\text{mat}})\gamma_d \gamma_c^{2-2\chi_{\text{mat}}}} & \gamma < \gamma_c \end{cases} \quad (\text{B5})$$

for loops produced during the matter era, and

$$t^4 \frac{d^2 \mathcal{N}}{d\ell dV_{\text{rad-mat}}} = \left(\frac{t}{t_{\text{eq}}}\right)^3 \left(\frac{1+z}{1+z_{\text{eq}}}\right)^3 t_{\text{eq}}^4 \times \frac{d^2 \mathcal{N}}{d\ell dV_{\text{rad}}} \left[ \frac{\gamma t + \gamma_d(t-t_{\text{eq}})}{t_{\text{eq}}} \right] \quad (\text{B6})$$

for loops produced during the radiation era and decaying during the matter era. The subscripts  $_{\text{rad}}$  and  $_{\text{mat}}$  refer to the radiation- and matter-dominated eras, respectively, and  $\gamma_c$  is the gravitational back-reaction scale.

For model **C**, the loop distribution can be approximated in the radiation era as

$$t^4 \frac{d^2 \mathcal{N}}{d\ell dV_{\text{rad}}} = \frac{c_{\text{rad}}}{1/2 - 2\chi_{\text{rad}}} \times \begin{cases} (\gamma + \gamma_d)^{2\chi_{\text{rad}}-3} - \frac{\gamma_\infty^{2\chi_{\text{rad}}-1/2}}{(\gamma + \gamma_d)^{5/2}} & \gamma_d < \gamma \\ \frac{\gamma^{2\chi_{\text{rad}}-2}}{(2-2\chi_{\text{rad}})\gamma_d} - \frac{\gamma_\infty^{2\chi_{\text{rad}}-1/2}}{(\gamma + \gamma_d)^{5/2}} & \gamma_c < \gamma < \gamma_d \\ \frac{\gamma_c^{2\chi_{\text{rad}}-2}}{(2-2\chi_{\text{rad}})\gamma_d} - \frac{\gamma_\infty^{2\chi_{\text{rad}}-1/2}}{(\gamma + \gamma_d)^{5/2}} & \gamma < \gamma_c \end{cases} \quad (\text{B7})$$

and in the matter era as

$$t^4 \frac{d^2 \mathcal{N}}{d\ell dV_{\text{mat}}} = \frac{c_{\text{mat}}}{1 - 2\chi_{\text{mat}}} \times \begin{cases} (\gamma + \gamma_d)^{2\chi_{\text{mat}}-3} - \frac{\gamma_\infty^{2\chi_{\text{mat}}-1}}{(\gamma + \gamma_d)^2} & \gamma_d < \gamma \\ \frac{\gamma^{2\chi_{\text{mat}}-2}}{(2-2\chi_{\text{mat}})\gamma_d} - \frac{\gamma_\infty^{2\chi_{\text{mat}}-1}}{(\gamma + \gamma_d)^2} & \gamma_c < \gamma < \gamma_d \\ \frac{\gamma_c^{2\chi_{\text{mat}}-2}}{(2-2\chi_{\text{mat}})\gamma_d} - \frac{\gamma_\infty^{2\chi_{\text{mat}}-1}}{(\gamma + \gamma_d)^2} & \gamma < \gamma_c \end{cases} \quad (\text{B8})$$

where  $\gamma_\infty$  is the size of the largest loops in scaling units.

### Appendix C: The burst analysis pipeline

The cosmic string burst search pipeline is divided into three main analysis steps. First, the cosmic string gravitational waveform is searched in LIGO and Virgo data using match-filtering techniques. A bank of waveform templates is chosen to match the expected signal in the frequency domain:

$$\tau_{i,j}(f) = A f^{-q_i} \Theta(f_j - f) \Theta(f - f_i). \quad (\text{C1})$$

The spectral index  $q_i$  is taken from Eq. 1 for cusps, kinks or kink-kink collisions. The waveform frequency  $f$  is limited in range using the Heaviside function  $\Theta$ . The low-frequency cut-off  $f_l$ , resulting from the size of the feature producing the gravitational waves, takes values well below the sensitive band of the LIGO and Virgo detectors. We take  $f_l = 16$  Hz. The high-frequency cutoff  $f_j$  is a consequence of the gravitational-wave emission being observable only within a (frequency-dependent) viewing angle  $\theta_m$ , given in Eq. 3. The angle between the line of sight and the gravitational-wave direction,  $\theta$ , must be smaller than  $\theta_m/2$ , yielding  $f < [2g_2\ell(1+z)\theta^3]^{-1}$ . This high-frequency cutoff is unknown and is considered as a free parameter, taking discrete values indexed by  $j$ . When searching for gravitational waves produced by cusps and kinks, we use 31 templates with high-frequency cutoff values distributed between 30 Hz and 4096 Hz and spaced in such a way that we guarantee less than 0.1% loss in the signal-to-noise ratio due to template mismatch. The cutoffs  $f_j$  are sparser at higher frequencies, with 17 templates below 100 Hz. For kink-kink collisions, the gravitational-wave radiation is isotropic and a single template covering the entire frequency band is used.

The standard matched filter output for template  $\tau_{i,j}$  on the gravitational wave data  $h_{\text{det}}$  is

$$\rho_{i,j,\text{det}}(t) = 4\Re \int_0^\infty \frac{\tau_{i,j}^*(f) h_{\text{det}}(f)}{S_n(f)} \exp(2\sqrt{-1}\pi f t) df. \quad (\text{C2})$$

Here,  $S_n(f)$  is the single-sided noise power spectral density of the detector. It is estimated locally over a few minutes of detector data. The normalization parameter  $A$  in each template is determined by [71]

$$4\Re \int_0^\infty \frac{\tau_{i,j}^*(f) \tau_{i,j}(f)}{S_n(f)} \exp(2\sqrt{-1}\pi f t) df = 1. \quad (\text{C3})$$

The O3 LIGO–Virgo dataset is analyzed in five consecutive chunks of data to account for the detectors' noise evolution over the entire run. This is because the statistic we use to rank events better separates the signal from noise when the characteristics of the noise are relatively unchanged. The chunk boundaries are defined by sudden changes of sensitivity of one detector and by commissioning interventions, including the 1-month commissioning break in October 2019. The signal-to-noise ratio time-series  $\rho_{i,j,\text{det}}(t)$  is computed for each detector, accumulating a total of 245 days, 252 days and 250 days for the L1, H1 and V1 detectors respectively. The signal-to-noise ratio time-series are required to be above 3.75 and are clustered among templates. If multiple templates trigger within a 0.1 second window, we cluster the event as a single trigger, the parameters of which are derived from the highest signal-to-noise ratio template in the cluster.

After the match-filtering step, a time coincidence is performed pair-wise between the triggers of each detector using a time window wide enough to account for the maximum light-travel time between detectors and calibration time uncertainties of 8ms. A resulting set of

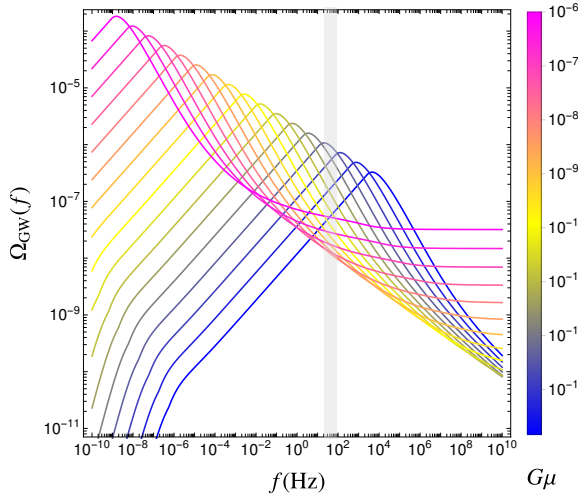


FIG. 4. The gravitational-wave spectra for model **C-1** for different choices of  $G\mu$  where  $N_k$  is fixed to be 90. The gray band corresponds to the frequency range (20 – 86) Hz used in the analysis.

double- and triple-coincident events is obtained when at least two detectors are taking data in nominal conditions, yielding a total observation time of  $T_{\text{obs}} = 273.5$  days.

Finally, to discriminate astrophysical signals from background noise, we apply the multivariate method described in [53], which uses a set of simulated cosmic string events and typical noise events to statistically infer the

probability for a coincident event to be signal or noise. Hence, a likelihood ratio,  $\Lambda$ , is constructed with parameters characterizing the event [52]. For the O3 analysis, we introduce for the first time the event duration as a new discriminating variable. The event duration is defined as the duration for which  $\rho_{i,j,\text{det}}(t)$  remains above threshold considering all templates  $j$  and using a tolerance of 100 ms. Using this parameter, coupled to the signal-to-noise ratio, allows us to reject a large population of long-duration and low signal-to-noise ratio transient noise events contributing to the search background.

#### Appendix D: Feature in SGWB constraint for Model C-1

The stochastic gravitational-wave constraint for model **C-1** has a special feature, shown in Fig. 3. The appearance of this notch, when  $N_k > 70$ , is induced by the unique behavior of the gravitational-wave spectrum in this model. In Fig. 4 we compare the corresponding spectrum for different choices of  $G\mu$  with  $N_k$  fixed to be 90. The cosmic string network produces a stochastic background in a wide frequency range, while LIGO/Virgo is only sensitive to a very narrow frequency window labeled by the gray band. As  $G\mu$  increases, the stochastic power spectrum within the LIGO/Virgo window does not change monotonically. This leads to a non-exclusion in a small range of  $G\mu$  when  $N_k > 70$ . The exact location of the notch is determined through a detailed Bayesian analysis presented in the main text.

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